

Statement from  
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Collier County Sheriff's Office  
Human Trafficking Unit

Thank you, Chairman Kennedy, Ranking Member Enzi, Senator Sanders and other distinguished Committee Members, for granting me the privilege of speaking to this committee today. On behalf of Sheriff Hunter of the Collier County Sheriff's Office, I am honored to speak to this committee about my experiences in investigating human trafficking and how this crime against fundamental human rights impacts victims working in the agricultural fields. Prior to the inception of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) the Collier Sheriff's Office had been involved in some investigations of human trafficking, but in December 2004 through a grant from the Bureau of Justice Administration the Collier Sheriff's Office dedicated a full time investigator and victim advocate to combat human trafficking and assist victims in Collier County. In the beginning of 2006, I became the investigator for the human trafficking unit. Since then, I have worked with prosecutors from the U.S. Attorneys Office, and Department of Justice's Civil Rights Unit, Special Agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), and the Department of Homeland Security Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and state and local law enforcement agencies to ensure the prosecution of the perpetrators of human trafficking offenses. In addition, I have collaborated with members of Non-Governmental Organizations such as, The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and the Florida Freedom Network to provide assistance to victims of human trafficking.

One aspect of my duties is to provide education on the subject of human trafficking to law enforcement agencies, community service providers and civic groups throughout the area. When I first began providing the presentations there was one common occurrence. Most people were unaware that human trafficking, which is just another moniker for slavery, was occurring today. Today's form of slavery does not bear the overt nature of pre-civil war slavery, but it is no less heinous and reprehensible than the slavery of our nation's past. Today, human trafficking has surreptitiously found its way into our society and continues to thrive even as I speak to this committee today.

As I mentioned earlier, human trafficking is nothing less than modern day slavery. Trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transporting, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage and slavery (TVPA 2000). Through interviews with victims, I have gained knowledge of how traffickers accomplish their control of the victims. Traffickers use threats and actual physical violence on victims to enforce their will upon them. Victims have been beaten or have witnessed beatings of other workers who would not relinquish their earnings, disobeyed traffickers, who have left the camp and been found, or who have attempted to escape. Traffickers create an environment of fear meant to control and isolate victims. Another method of

control used by traffickers is to hold a victim in a system perpetually accruing debt. Victims have incurred debts for housing, food, water and transportation. In one instance, victims related to me they were charged three days worth of wages if they were sick for one day and could not work. This of course is added to the debt then subtracted from what the victims have earned at the end of the week. Victims earning a dollar per bucket of picked tomatoes can work for the full week and receive nothing more than twenty dollars from the trafficker at the end of the week.

Traffickers use threats against the victim's family in their home country to control the victims. In one instance, a victim ran away from the camp and the traffickers called the victim's family in Mexico. The family was threatened and told to tell the victim, he needed to return to the camp or the traffickers would kill the family. Once the victim heard this, he returned to the camp. This same tactic has hindered an investigation of mine. Victims were cooperative, and were ready to assist in prosecution. They subsequently related this to their family, and the family asked them to no longer cooperate. The family became fearful for their lives because as the victims said to me the traffickers are the law of the village. I asked the victims what this meant. They replied the trafficker's family has all the guns, and they run the village.

These are only a few of the examples of what I have learned during my investigations. Traffickers employ these and several other methods to exploit victims for the traffickers own personal financial gain. The bottom line is the traffickers profiting from the suffering of other human beings to satisfy their greed. Traffickers cultivate this environment of fear to their own benefit and because of the fear; few people are willing to identify themselves as victims to law enforcement making my task difficult at best.

The State of Florida has been the venue of several cases of human trafficking over the past decade. During this time, several cases have been brought against traffickers who have forced their victims to work in the agricultural fields in Florida. Victims of these cases were forced to work in both tomato and citrus fields. One common denominator identified by Florida State University's Center for the Advancement of Human Rights (CAHR) research and in my investigations is in almost all cases of labor trafficking in Florida, the traffickers are subcontractors to larger businesses. This system also allows the larger corporation to remain willfully blind of any abuses occurring and minimize any liability. In turn, both the trafficker and the business profit from the work of the enslaved victim. Currently, actual knowledge is the standard of proof required to find a business culpable of human trafficking offenses. Short of a change to state and federal law both corporations and traffickers will be able to continue to profit from this system.

Since U.S. vs. Ramos in 1997 until now and including investigations I am currently involved with human trafficking, slavery, is occurring in the agricultural fields of Florida. Because the work is migratory, slavery is not just affecting Florida but other states as well where workers are transported to pick in the fields. In addition, this atrocity has affected United States citizens who were enslaved in Florida in the case of U.S. vs. Evans where U.S. citizens were held and forced to work in the citrus fields. One public misperception is that a person needs to be transported into this country to be a victim of

human trafficking. This couldn't be further from the truth and not required by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. Knowing that this is occurring not just in the State of Florida but across the Nation, it is egregious that any entity should deny the existence of human trafficking. This arrogance, willful blindness, and lack of social responsibility offends our basic rights guaranteed by our nation's constitution.

Once again, I would like to thank Chairman Kennedy, Ranking Member Enzi, Senator Sanders, and the other distinguished members of this committee for allowing me to be here today.

It would be my pleasure to answer any questions this committee has.